

# **THE PROSE POEM: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL**

Volume 3 | 1994

## **Stuart Dybek's *The Story of Mist* and Naomi Shihab Nye's *Mint***

Richard Murphy

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Stuart Dybek. *The Story of Mist*. State Street Press Chapbooks, 1993. Brockport, New York: State Street Press, 1993. 28 pp. \$5.00.  
Naomi Shihab Nye. *Mint*. State Street Chapbooks, 1991. Brockport, New York: State Street Press, 1991. 27 pp. \$5.00.

Because I grew up in a largely Bohemian town outside of Chicago, coming across Stuart Dybek's writing is a visit to my childhood. Many of the characters of his stories are familiar to me from experience or through friends. *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods* (Ecco, 1986) offers extended, sometimes Algrenesque stories of a kind found in Dybek's most recent collection, *The Coast of Chicago* (Knopf, 1990), relating travels into life with or through Displaced Persons and eccentrics. In *The Coast*, Dybek uses the prose poem as an "interchapter," in the fashion of *In Our Time*; the difference here too is affecting. With detail pressed out, we are left with the attar of narrative.

It is in this pressing out that the prose poem reveals itself in a subtle aroma, not simply as passages of poetic prose which lead to epiphany but as an evocation of the suppressed details and, thus, the informing emotion. Dybek does this time and again in *The Story of Mist*, the sound pun purposefully ambiguous. The works are poetic in their evanescence, the shadings of lost opportunity or loss itself. There are sometimes startling images of loneliness as in "Moan," which ends with two isolati masturbating in separate apartments, one above the other, he timing his moan to her climatic sigh. This, incidentally, might be read as a distillation of "Chopin in Winter" (*The Coast*), a story of a boy learning the depth of silence from a disgraced young woman pianist and his grandfather.

The collection is rife with absence and the sense of loss—of youth as in "Black Angel," of possibility in "The Kiss," while offering glimpses of union, beautifully presented in "The Story of Mist," the final offering of the book, With a Monet-like opening—"Mist hangs like incense in the trees. Obscured trains uncouple in a dusk that is also obscured, and, later, a beacon sweeps across the faces of a crowd gathered at the shoreline, standing knee-deep in mist"—the poem presents a Rodinesque center-piece, a wife bringing a beer to her husband, a welder:

He holds her to him with his left arm, while extending the blue flame away from them with his right, and she holds the foaming bottle of beer away from them as if it too were a torch. When their mouths touch, her breath enters him like mist.

That sense of intimacy and union, denied in other places in the chapbook, is here in lovely balance, and the work itself, with its religious suggestion of incense and more, sustains a careful symmetry between mysteries.

The poetic usages of balance and antithesis, repetition, evocation rather than statement, as well as connotative diction and imagery, render Dybek's work different from the short story, no matter how short, though the emphasis on the consciousness of character removes it from the French musical poetics associated with the early development of the prose poem.

Michael Wood recently wrote (*LRB*, 7 Oct 1993, 12), reviewing Prendergast's *Paris and the 19th Century* (Blackwell, 1993), "It's not that the prose poem is the urban form *par excellence*, as is often suggested: it's that the prose poem, in Baudelaire's hands, becomes the site of tension and threatened collapse, takes the stubborn realities of the city into its language." While a real concern to Dybek, the stubborn reality of the city is fairly remote to Naomi Shihab Nye, whose *Mint* is, to a significant extent, set in the Southwest.

Nye trades the urban scene for the rural and is also more directly autobiographical in her work. She begins by disarming criticism with this notice:

I think of these pieces as being simple paragraphs rather than "prose poems," though a few might sneak into the prose poem category, were they traveling on their own. The paragraph, standing by itself, has a lovely pocket-sized quality. It garnishes the page, as mint garnishes a plate....

Having taught and tried enough writing to learn true respect for the paragraph, I am intrigued and do not argue with this. I do expect difficulty in moving quickly from something like a topic sentence to something like a conclusion. Doing this repeatedly to poetic effect is devilishly difficult; Nye achieves some success.

There are striking lines; "When the last great-uncle dies, we inherit a box of letters written in graceful script on paper so rich you could drink it" ("Not Even a Story"), but the drag of the prosaic beginning weighs down the developing image, and the paragraph later lapses into,

What happened next? They had seven children together, only one of whom would ever marry. They moved to Portland. They

rode a train across the country with a week-old baby. I stack the letters in sequences...

The intrinsic merit of the story, of these lines, eludes me. On the other hand, "All Intermediate Points" offers an intriguing opening:

If today you are going to Buda, Texas and the bus rolls into Buda, Texas and stops, you climb down and you are ready to climb down. Perhaps you sigh, make a great heave-ho. It has been a long trip. But if today you are going to St. Louis or Pittsburgh and the bus passes through Buda, Texas and someone else climbs down, it does not seem like a long trip at all.

The next sentence, "This has always fascinated me," interrupts the possible effects evident in the passage. This is too prosaic, though the closing, "does the phrase 'all intermediate points' wash over you pungently as the scent of bus terminal hotcakes and do you eat them one at a time?" again indicates Nye's ability to capture and use a commonplace item to significant effect—parents' wedding anniversary ("Anniversary"), passing through a town on a quiet Sunday evening ("The Endurance of Poth, Texas"), and, of course, mint itself, which in Nye's hand turns out to be more than mere garnishing. In these, her shrewd eye penetrates experience we too often ignore or take for granted, or, even worse, sentimentalize in a stock response.

Not all of Nye's work is simply a paragraph; several, including "Any Idea" and "Our Nation's Capital," are longer. I don't think the attempt to use this form for political or social comment a good idea unless it is conveyed subtly, an achievement of "Our Nation's Capital"; not so in "Trouble with the Stars and Stripes," which puts common thought in common language, lacking both angle and tension to evoke the desired effect: "We have no idea. We can still feel good in this country about what we don't see, if we give it a good enough name. All forms of righteousness begin to terrify. A presidential address, a church..." The personal touch with which it ends does not intensify the experience of the work; rather, the safety of shouting while asleep in a middle-class bed at the time of Desert Storm—

My husband who never shouts shouted in his sleep while the bombs were dropping, *"I just don't think humans are doing a very good job!"*

—seems banal at best and is not rescued by his stating "when he hears certain words. *My enemy*—'who is so beautiful,' he whispers."

Here, the emotion Nye sought is found in readers nodding in agreement with the sentiment *expressed* rather than in the texture of the work itself.

Still, while perhaps Dybek's homeboy, I must confess to enjoying Nye's work, which has an enigmatic resonance arising from its multicultural context and its locale. My advice, read them for yourself.

I would also add that we should be grateful to State Street Press for making these nicely printed, well-made chapbooks available.

**Richard Murphy**